



**Directorate of  
Intelligence**

~~SECRET~~

25X1

# **India: The Challenge of Communal and Caste Conflict**

25X1

**An Intelligence Assessment**

**MASTER FILE COPY**

**DO NOT GIVE OUT  
OR MARK ON**

~~SECRET~~

*NESA 83-10185  
August 1983*

*Copy 314*

**Page Denied**



# India: The Challenge of Communal and Caste Conflict

25X1

An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [redacted] Office of  
Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, with a  
contribution from [redacted] Office of  
Central Reference. It was coordinated with the  
Directorate of Operations. [redacted]

25X1

25X1

25X1

Comments and queries are welcome and may be  
directed to the Chief, South Asia Division, NESA [redacted]  
[redacted]

25X1

25X1

Secret

NESA 83-10185  
August 1983

**Secret**

25X1

**India: The Challenge of  
Communal and Caste Conflict**

25X1

**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 23 June 1983  
was used in this report.*

The rising incidence and intensity of religious and caste violence in India over the past year:

- Pose a long-term challenge to India's political stability.
- Raise concerns in New Delhi about the security of disturbed border areas.
- Strain the country's relations with the United States, Pakistan, and the Islamic states of the Middle East.

Since Prime Minister Gandhi's return to power in 1980, increasing polarization of the majority Hindu community and minority Sikh and Muslim groups has injected new religious tensions into the society and politics that threaten the secular basis of the Indian state. Gandhi's policy of encouraging the expectations of minority groups has led to rising demands that contribute to a growing Hindu backlash, sparked by Muslim and Sikh revivalist movements. Civil disorders have occurred as dissatisfied minorities goaded by militant communal leaders have clashed with police and national security forces. In Assam and Punjab, political and economic demands by activists have led to communal conflict, major civil disturbances, and secessionist movements directly challenging national authority.

Since 1980, caste conflict between untouchables and higher status Hindus has likewise become a source of endemic civil disorder in both rural and urban areas. The increasing assertiveness of low-caste groups in pursuit of their interests poses a rising threat of rural violence directed against civil authorities as well as higher caste groups.

New Delhi's continuing inability to contain religious and caste tensions has damaged Gandhi's image and eroded her electoral base. The inability of state governments to control such confrontations at an early stage forces the national government to intervene at a later stage when resort to repressive measures is virtually essential to restore order. Muslims and untouchables—key groups in Gandhi's past electoral victories—have begun shifting their votes from the ruling Congress Party in protest over the perceived incompetence and indifference of state and local Congress Party authorities.

Secret

[Redacted] 25X1

Although, in our judgment, caste and communal conflict do not threaten the stability of the Indian political system in the short term, in the longer term the government's continuing failure to resolve these problems may result in widening confrontations between militant communal groups and government authorities. We believe that unless the government evolves new strategies for defusing communal and caste demands by the time elections are next due in 1985, its increasing resort to repressive measures will probably spur new opposition coalitions capable of undercutting the Congress Party's majority in parliament. Any new government dependent for its tenure on electoral alliances would probably have even greater difficulty initiating controversial reforms and tough security measures required to restore order.

Violence among communal groups in India has also damaged Gandhi's reputation abroad and complicated her foreign policy. Her publicly voiced suspicions that Pakistan and the United States are contributing to tensions in two border states—Punjab and Assam—have become potential obstacles to the rapprochement she seeks with both countries. Adverse comments about New Delhi's treatment of Indian Muslims by Islamic officials and press in the Arab states have sparked official protests from New Delhi, which is committed to improving relations with those states. Gandhi's abiding fear of foreign intervention in Indian domestic affairs, in our view, deflects her attention from the social, economic, and political sources of religious and caste conflict and reduces her ability to develop new policies to meet changing circumstances.

Despite Gandhi's suspicions, communal conflicts in India are chiefly products of domestic conditions, not foreign intervention. Nevertheless, foreign powers have sought to advance their interests by exploiting existing tensions. The Soviets have engaged in clandestine efforts to discredit the United States and undermine Indo-Pakistani rapprochement. Although Islamabad may have contributed to the Sikh agitation in Punjab, we do not believe that the Arab states have instigated communal unrest, even though their involvement in funding Indian Muslim institutions fuels New Delhi's fears of Islamic fundamentalism from abroad.

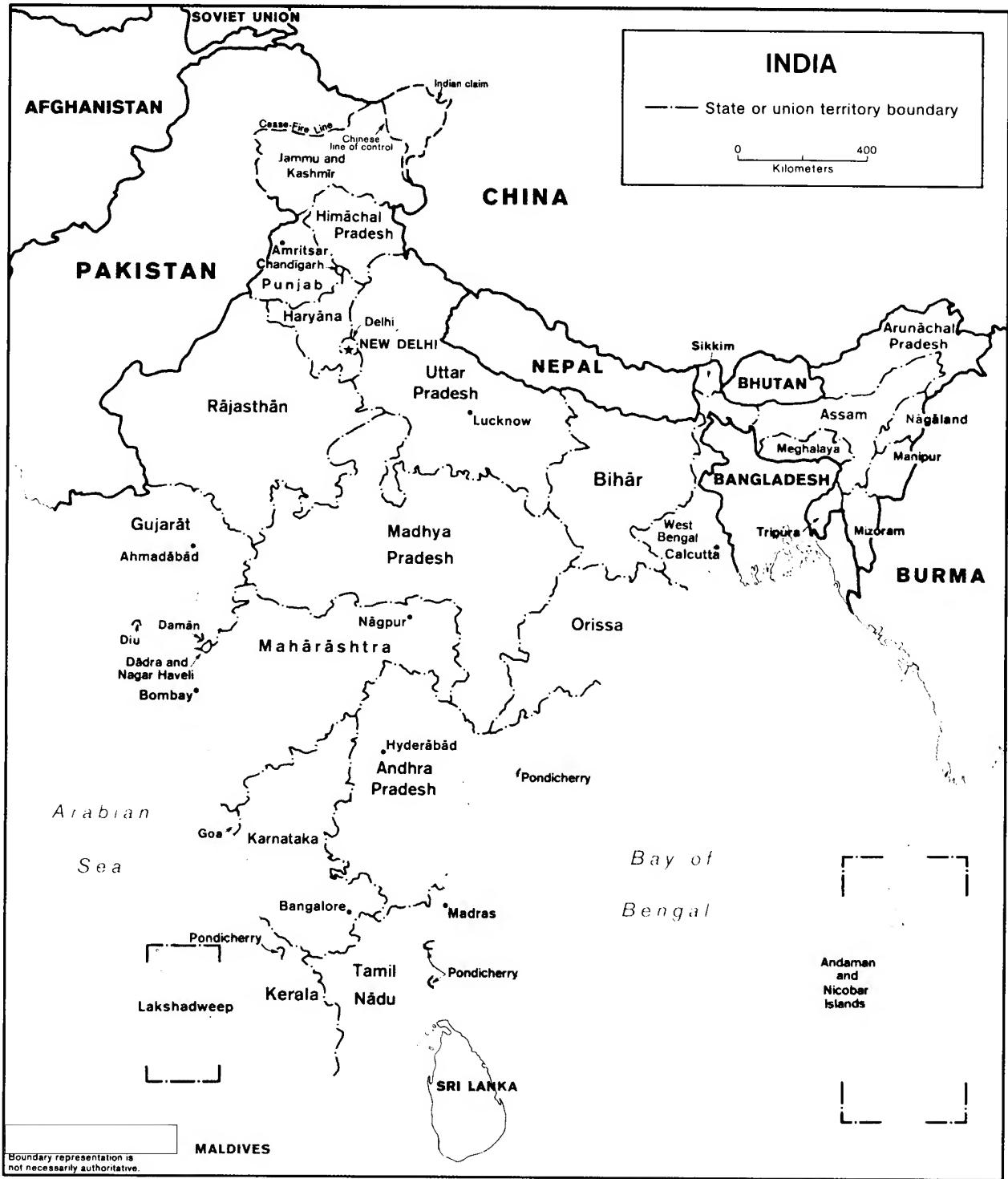
[Redacted] 25X1

Secret

Secret

25X1

**Figure 1**



**Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative**

506006 8-83

V

Secret

**Secret**

25X1

## India: The Challenge of Communal and Caste Conflict

25X1

### Gandhi's Most Serious Domestic Problem

Since Prime Minister Gandhi's return to power in 1980, she has publicly acknowledged that the growing scope, duration, and militance of perennial caste<sup>1</sup> and communal<sup>2</sup> conflict have become her most serious domestic problem. The Indian press has documented that a number of state governments have failed to contain rising tensions between the Hindu majority and the Sikh and Muslim religious minorities. In two violence-ridden border states—Assam and Punjab—religious revivalists are taking over regional movements, according to US Embassy reporting and the Indian media. In our view, the new religious dimensions of the longstanding separatist sentiment in these states have complicated prospects for a political resolution of regional demands.

Communal groups are increasingly making demands on New Delhi that, in our view, threaten the secular basis of the Indian Government. Press reporting indicates that the growing polarization between religious communities has fueled outbreaks of civil disorder serious enough to strain the capabilities of state police as well as nationally controlled security forces.

Gandhi publicly attributes communal and caste conflict to instigation by opposition parties and foreign powers,

her government's policy of encouraging caste and religious minorities to voice their expectations has led to rising demands from these groups that may provoke a Hindu backlash.

Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim fundamentalist leaders have deliberately magnified growing economic and political rivalries between religious groups.

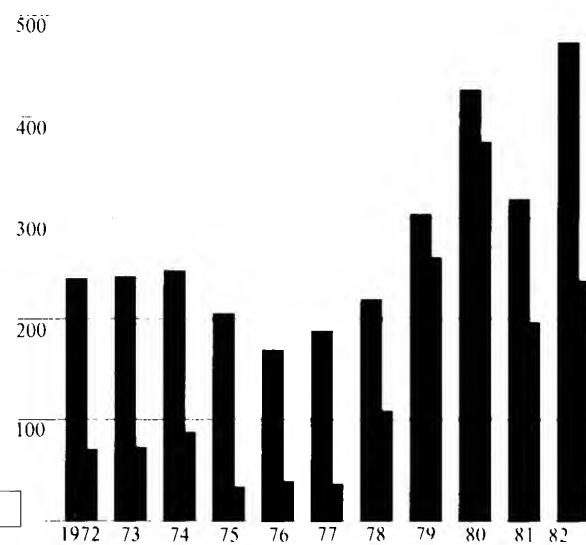
<sup>1</sup> Caste refers to the hereditary classes into which Hindus in India are divided by orthodox Hindu tradition. A person's caste traditionally dictated his social status, rules of social intercourse, customs, and occupation.

<sup>2</sup> Communal in the Indian context refers to a distinct, recognized religious community, such as Hindus or Muslims.

**Figure 2**  
**India: Hindu-Muslim Riots, 1972-82**

Official number

- Conflicts
- Deaths



25X1

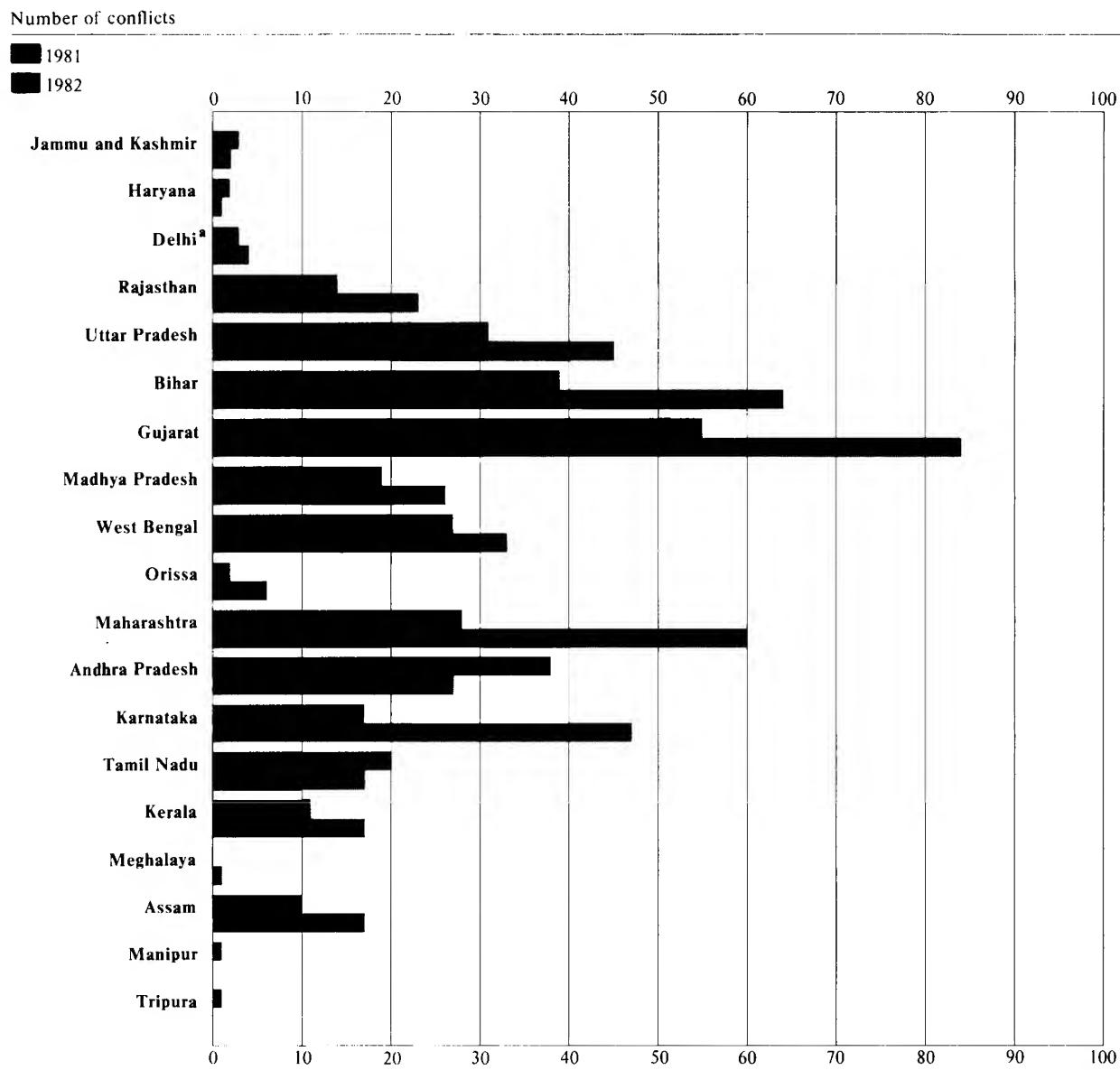
25X1

25X1  
25X1  
25X1

Hindu-Muslim and caste conflicts have also mounted since 1980 as disadvantaged groups abandon their traditional reliance on government promises and aggressively defend their own interests, often in defiance of government authority.

25X1  
25X1  
25X1

**Figure 3**  
**India: Hindu-Muslim Riots by State and Union Territory, 1981-82**



<sup>a</sup> Union territory.

300458 (A03226) 8-83

25X1

Secret

---

***Principal Indian Muslim Organizations***

*In general, the multiplicity of political parties at the national and state levels has limited the potential influence of these organizations on Muslim politics, according to Embassy reporting.*

*The Jamaat-e-Islami (Society of Islam)—reputed to be the best organized Muslim group—claims only 2,900 members but is influential among Muslim intellectuals. It seeks in principle to convert all Hindus to Islam. The Jamaat has largely avoided an active political role, concentrating instead on upholding religious orthodoxy and supporting continued juridical status for Islamic personal law in India. The separate Kashmir Jamaat unit has advanced candidates for local and state elections with little success.*

*The Tablighi Jamaat (Missionary Society) is reportedly the most popular Islamic movement in India but lacks organizational structure or formal leadership. Like the Jamaat, it is guided by the Muslim ulama, or clergy. Founded over a century ago, the Tablighi Jamaat holds that the solutions to the problems confronting Muslims lie in religious piety.*

*The Jamiat-i-Ulema-e-Hind (Congregation of Indian Scholars of Islamic Law) was founded in 1919 to counter Hindu efforts to reclaim converts to Islam. In its capacity as a pressure group, it has enjoyed considerable access to and influence on the Congress Party. In the past year, it has moved away from the ruling party. The Jamiat has supported secular government and communal harmony as being in the best interest of the Muslim minority and counseled Muslims not to form their own political party.*

*The Majlis-e-Mushawarat (Consultative Council), founded in 1964, is a loose confederation of disparate Islamic organizations. It has aimed with limited success to marshal Muslim political support for individual candidates subscribing to a nine-point manifesto of traditional Muslim demands. In practice, it has been hampered by divisions among its member groups.*

---

**Muslims: Abandoning Accommodationist Politics**

Hindu-Muslim tensions have heightened during the past three years as a new generation of urban Muslims reject their community's longstanding image of quiescent, second-class citizenship. India's 70 million Muslims—about 12 percent of the population—remain educationally and economically disadvantaged and geographically scattered. According to Embassy and press reports, Muslims have not made even limited progress toward improving their status despite their strategy of delivering electoral support to Hindu-dominated parties—chiefly the ruling Congress Party—in exchange for promises of concessions and protection.

25X1

In the face of unredressed grievances, some Muslims—particularly those of the lower and lower middle class—have turned to fundamentalist Islamic organizations that emphasize the threat posed by Hindu society to the Muslim minority, according to press analysis. The Muslim fundamentalists seek solutions to the community's problems through a return to religious orthodoxy and the retention of Islamic personal law rather than through participation in electoral politics.

25X1

25X1

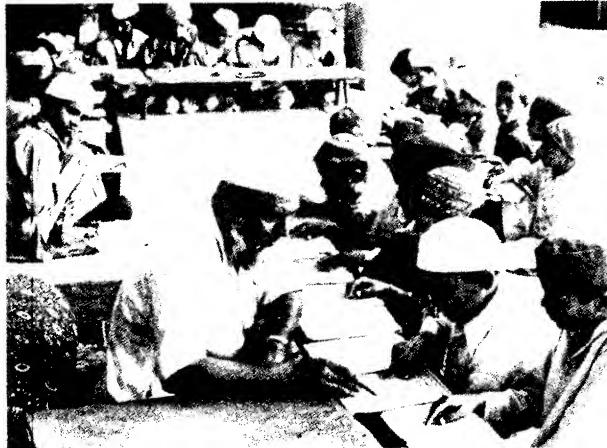
In addition to the more visible activities by fundamentalist groups, a new Muslim middle class has emerged that is bolder in its pursuit of higher status, according to US Embassy and Indian press sources. Although their numbers and the extent of their influence are still unclear, these Muslims have aggressively worked toward improving their social and economic status and gaining greater access to political power. The Indian media report that they have demanded increased access to jobs, educational opportunities, and separate political representation.

25X1

25X1

This new generation of urban Muslims is reportedly weighing more critically the benefits of continued support for the ruling Congress Party, according to US Embassy and Indian press reporting. These sources indicate that the new political confidence of these Muslims is fueled by increased economic clout,

25X1



India Today ©

*Traditional Muslim religious school in Old Delhi. The orthodox education offered by Muslim clergy in such schools fails to prepare young Muslims to compete with Hindus in the job market.*

which results in part from the inflow of funds from the Arab states through trade and expatriate remittances. A leading Muslim Congress Party politician told Embassy officials that Muslims can no longer be taken for granted. They will cast their votes for those who they believe offer the greatest likelihood of protection and promotion of their economic advancement—including the Communist parties.

Indian commentators report that Muslim politicians have become more vocal in expressing their community's grievances, above all their lack of physical security. Muslim representatives have formed an informal caucus to voice their concerns. Forty-five Muslim members of parliament submitted a memorandum of grievances to Prime Minister Gandhi in November 1982 on the eve of elections in two key southern states. They reminded Gandhi of her election promises in 1980 to increase Muslim representation in the police forces, to prosecute officials—principally state police officers—who fail to protect minority rights, and to offer compensation for loss of life and property in riots. Muslim votes for opposition parties contributed to the Congress Party's defeat in both Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, according to the press.

Embassy reporting indicates that rising Muslim assertiveness has contributed to the unusual severity of communal rioting since 1980. Muslim leaders have

### *Muslim Grievances and Demands*

*A recent memorandum from an Indian Muslim group to the Home Secretary in New Delhi summarized the major grievances of India's Muslims as follows, according to the Indian press:*

- *The increase in "anti-Muslim violence."*
- *The government's inattention to the disadvantaged social and economic status of the Muslims, including their low representation in trade and commerce and their declining representation in government jobs.*

*The memorandum proposed as remedies that:*

- *The electoral system be changed to one of proportional representation.*
- *State and national government jobs including those in public-sector companies be reserved for Muslims in proportion to their numbers.*
- *A minority Economic Development Corporation be created to actively aid Muslims in economic development.*
- *The "educational backwardness" of Muslims be alleviated by liberal government grants to Muslim educational institutions, particularly those teaching in Urdu, the language shared by most Indian Muslims.*
- *The advisory Minorities Commission be granted constitutional status and powers of inquiry.*
- *The Islamic personal laws retain their juridical status.*

encouraged militant confrontations with authorities and with the majority Hindu community, according to press reports. Young urban Muslims have increasingly defended their perceived prerogatives against police as well as Hindus. They allege discrimination against them by the predominantly Hindu police, according to the Indian media.

25X1

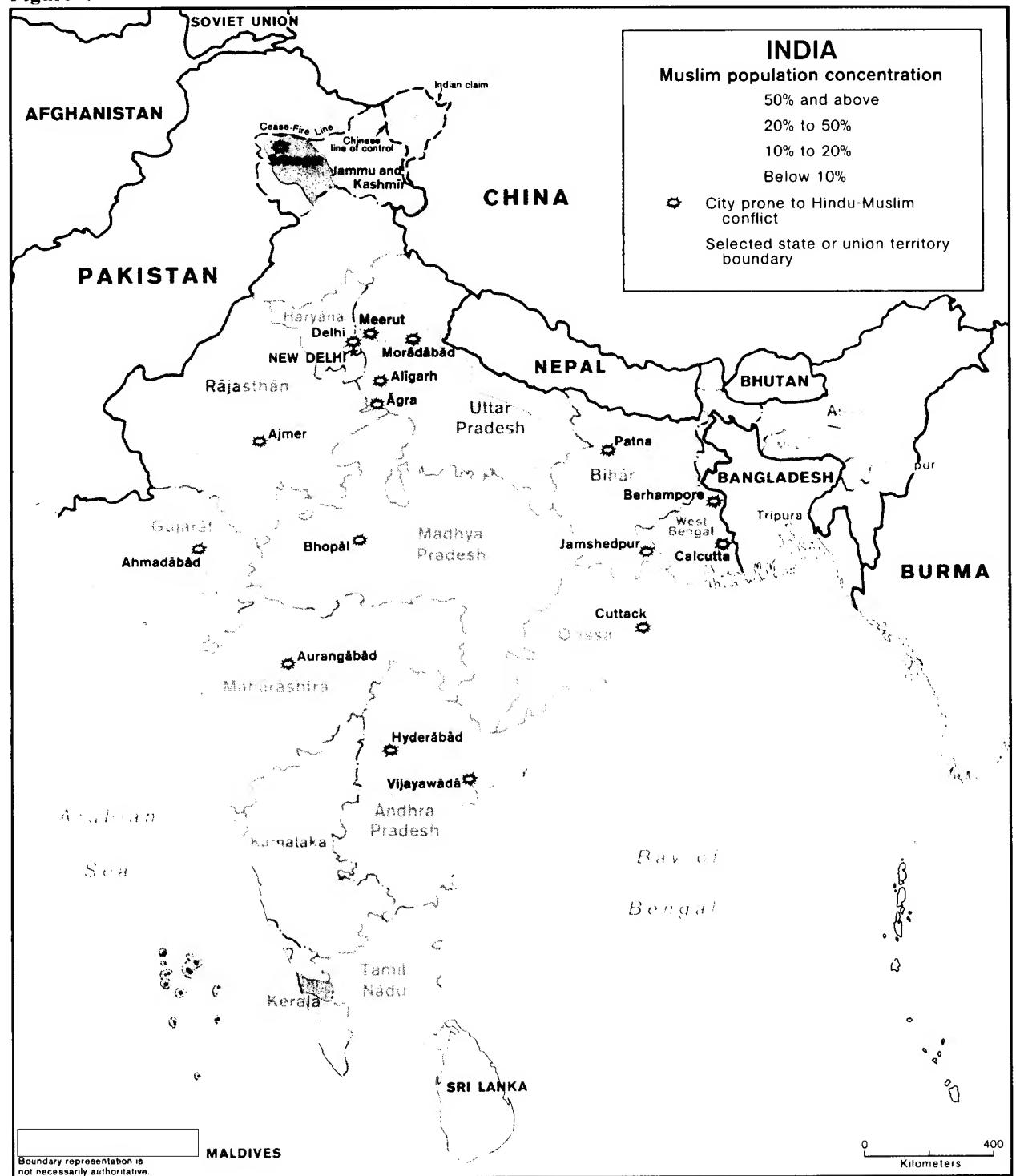
25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

**Figure 4**



**Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative.**

506007 8-83

506007 8-83

25X1

---

### **Major National Hindu Organizations**

**The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)** (People's Party of India) is widely viewed as India's best organized, most viable opposition party. It derives much of its strength from its affiliation with the paramilitary RSS (see below), inherited from the erstwhile Jan Sangh Party. Formed in 1980 after the dissolution of the coalition Janata Party, the BJP claims a membership of approximately 2.5 million and has had some success in byelections. It has attempted to broaden its base of support beyond its core membership of north Indian Hindus. The president of the BJP is A. B. Vajpayee, who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs in the 1977-80 Janata Party national government.

**The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)** (National Self-Help Organization) is a militant, anti-Muslim cultural organization dedicated to the revival of a Hindu way of life. It exercises political influence through the BJP. The RSS equates Indian citizenship with the dominant culture—Hindu and Hindi-speaking. Its activities include paramilitary training for young male members. The RSS claims over a million members and has recently scored its first major membership gains in the south.

**The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)** (The Hindu Way Assembly) is reportedly the fastest growing Hindu communal organization. Founded in 1964, it seeks to reconvert Hindus who have embraced either Islam or Christianity. Like the RSS, the VHP labels Christians and Muslims as "foreigners." It became prominent in 1981 after it sought to counter the conversions to Islam of Hindu untouchables in the south. The VHP is headed by a former princely ruler, Maharana Bhawant Singh Mewar. It has units in every district of India as well as abroad.

25X1

**The Virat Hindu Samaj (VHS)** (Hindu Spiritual Association) is a Hindu revivalist organization founded in 1981 by a former member of the ruling Congress Party, Karan Singh. The VHS has stressed the unity of Hindus irrespective of caste rather than the threat of Islam. (C)

25X1

**The Hindu Unity Center (HUC)** is a new umbrella organization that includes the RSS and the VHP among its member groups. The HUC was formed earlier this year in response to Hindu conversions to Islam. The Hindu Resurgence Conference it sponsored last February was banned by the Tamil Nadu state government, resulting in violent confrontations between state police and militant Hindus.

25X1

25X1

### **Rising Hindu Chauvinism**

In the past three years, increased Muslim activism and a growing number of conversions to Islam among disadvantaged Hindu untouchables in the south have spurred a national Hindu backlash.

the rapid growth of Hindu chauvinist organizations that seek to redefine the secular Indian state as a Hindu nation reflects historical fears of an expansionist, militant Islam. Embassy officials note that the popular Hindu view of India as surrounded by Islamic states colors the majority's view of the Muslim minority.

Hindu chauvinist organizations traditionally rooted in the northern Hindi-speaking states have recently registered their first major growth in south India, according to the press. The chauvinists view any increase in

the presence of Islam or Christianity—India's "foreign-based" religions—as challenges to the national, or Hindu, identity. Indian press sources have noted that provocation of Muslims by members of Hindu organizations often precedes outbreaks of communal rioting. Following the conversion of untouchables to Islam in the south, Hindu villagers launched punitive attacks on both Muslims and untouchables. The reaction against conversions has widened to include attacks on Christian institutions and persons in the south, according to Embassy and press sources.

25X1

25X1

25X1

Secret



RSS leaders reviewing paramilitary drill. At center is supreme leader Balasaheb Deoras.

India Today ©

25X1

The resurgence of Hindu nationalism has brought Hindu organizations into conflict with state authorities. For example, the prohibition of the meeting of a Hindu umbrella organization earlier this year in Tamil Nadu sparked major protest demonstrations by the Hindu militants that resulted in an estimated 50,000 arrests, according to Indian press reports.

#### Punjab: From Regionalism to "Holy War"

In the past year, fundamentalist Sikhs in Punjab have sought to transform agitation by moderate leaders of the Sikh Akali Dal Party into a "holy war" against alleged discrimination by the "Hindu" national government.

According to US and Indian press reports, the Sikhs—a minority in India but a majority in Punjab—have demanded control of territories and waters now shared with adjacent states, increased autonomy for Punjab on a par with Jammu and Kashmir's special constitutional status, and special religious rights in the state. In our view, the apparent stalemate in two-year-old negotiations with the national government has facilitated the rise of militant Sikhs. The fundamentalist leaders have successfully mobilized a growing segment of Sikh Punjabis to challenge government authority, according to Embassy reports.

We believe growing Sikh chauvinism threatens hitherto harmonious Hindu-Sikh relations in Punjab. The widening influence of fundamentalist leader Bhindranwale has restrained moderate Akali Dal officials from criticizing his anti-Hindu rhetoric, according to Indian media correspondents. Although most Sikhs have traditionally regarded their faith as an offshoot of Hinduism, many Sikh fundamentalists are now demanding that they—like the Christian and Muslim minorities in India—receive constitutional recognition as a separate ethnic-religious community with their own personal laws. Press sources report that a growing minority of the Sikhs in Punjab support extremist demands for an independent Sikh nation, "Khalistan."

25X1

25X1  
25X1

Attacks on Hindus and growing Sikh militance have sparked Hindu fears for the safety of their community in Punjab. Encouraged by Hindu nationalist organizations—notably the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—Punjabi Hindus have begun organizing to

25X1

Secret



Militant Sikhs battle police in Punjab earlier this year.

*India Today* ©

defend their interests, according to the Indian media. Hindus responded to the formation early this year of a 75,000-man Sikh "martyr's army" by forming a Hindu counterforce about 1,200 strong.

#### Assam: From Nativism to Communal War

The massacres in Assam earlier this year—in which tribal Assamese, Hindus, and Muslims slaughtered each other—resulted when regional leaders lost control of a three-year-old protest against Bengali immigrants, according to US Embassy sources. Hindu and Muslim communal leaders stepped into the breach.

The longstanding antagonism between native Assamese and Bengali immigrants had hitherto been devoid of religious conflict. Communal leaders have successfully recast it as a confrontation between predominantly Hindu Assamese and Muslim Bengalis. Rising Hindu-Muslim tensions have damaged a long record of generally harmonious communal relations and diminished prospects for a negotiated settlement of Assamese demands, in our judgment.

The violence that has claimed as many as 7,000 lives and displaced a quarter million people since last February was sparked when Assamese student leaders led a boycott of state elections to protest voting rights for Bengalis who have entered the state since 1961.

#### Sikh Demands

*Fear of assimilation by the Hindus—particularly in urban Punjab—underlies the Sikhs' political activism. The objectives of various Sikh groups now united in opposition to New Delhi have ranged from secession to economic, political, and religious concessions that would increase Sikh dominance in Punjab. According to the press, recent demands have included:*

- *Annexation of Punjabi-speaking areas of adjacent states.*
- *Sole control for Punjab of Chandigarh, the state capital now shared with the adjacent state of Haryana.*
- *Formal declaration of Amritsar as a holy city.*
- *Sole control of river waters now shared with neighboring Haryana and Rajasthan.*
- *Separate religious codes for Sikhs, who are now governed by Hindu marriage and property acts*

25X1

25X1

25X1

*Other demands supported by many Sikhs in Punjab include:*

- *The grant to Punjab of total autonomy, with New Delhi retaining control over defense, foreign policy, communications, currency, and railways.*
- *Reversal of New Delhi's 1980 decision to recruit army personnel on the basis of a state quota system. The Akalis allege the new rule would reduce Sikh representation in the Army from its current 15 percent to 1.5 percent.*

25X1

The Assamese militants have agitated since 1980 for the deportation of the state's 5 million "foreigners"—chiefly Bengalis from Bangladesh—who they claim have displaced them from jobs and threatened their political control of the state, according to the Indian press. Demands from tribal groups for their own tribal state and the presence of Indian as well as Bangladeshi Bengalis have further complicated the disturbances in Assam.

25X1

25X1

Secret

Secret

---

***Principal Sikh Organizations in Punjab State***

*The Akali Dal Party is the chief political arm of the Sikhs in Punjab. In the 1950s and 1960s it agitated for the formation of a semiautonomous, Punjabi-speaking state—"Sikhistan." The Akalis demands resulted in the separation of predominantly Hindu, Hindi-speaking portions of Punjab to form a new state, Haryana. In the diminished Punjab the Akalis remained dependent on alliances with non-Sikh parties for their intermittent control of the Punjab government. In 1981 the Akalis lost power to the Congress Party and promptly launched a new agitation for semiautonomy. Common opposition to the Congress has united disparate factions of the Akalis in the past two years. The party's leader, Longowal, has so far resisted identification with Sikh separatism but has increasingly been outflanked by Sikh extremists who favor secession.*

*The Dal Khalsa (Khalsa Group) is a small, clandestine Sikh organization linked with and possibly funded by Sikh separatist leaders based in the United States, Britain, and Canada, according to the press. The Khalsa is believed to have about 200 young male members and was reportedly behind the 1981 hijacking to Pakistan of an Indian Airlines domestic flight. Members of the group have claimed responsibility for assassinating critics of separatist leaders and for*

Assam has provided fertile ground for the expansion of such communal organizations as the Hindu RSS and the Muslim Jamiat-i-Ulema-e-Hind and Jamaat-e-Islami. The RSS now claims 40,000 members in Assam. Capitalizing on the predominance of Muslims among the Bengali immigrants, the RSS and its parent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have proclaimed Assam in danger of being engulfed by Muslim infiltrators unless Hindu rule can be reestablished, according to the Indian press. Hindu and Muslim organizations participating in relief efforts have used the occasion to spread communal propaganda.

In our view, the violence in February has resulted in political conditions that dim prospects for a swift return to civil order. According to press reports, the

other terrorist acts. Recent press reports indicate popular support for the Dal Khalsa—and for Sikh separatism—is growing among Punjabi Sikhs.

25X1

*The Bhindranwales are an order founded by a local Sikh religious leader of that name before 1930, according to the press. Its leader is entitled to the honorific "Sant" before his name and "Bhindranwale" after it. Under the current leader—Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale—the Bhindranwales have become prominent and have carried out assassinations of members of the rival Nirankari sect, Punjabi political leaders, and opponents of Sikh chauvinism, by their own admission. In the past two years Sant Bhindranwale has became the moving force behind Sikh unrest in Punjab.*

25X1  
25X1

*The Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhakar Committee (SGPC) (Temple Management Committee) is the ruling religious body of the Sikhs and controls all Sikh places of worship. Together with the Akali Dal, the SGPC is widely viewed as the guardian of Sikh culture. G. S. Tohra—head of the SGPC for the past 15 years—has consistently supported extremist leader Bhindranwale in opposition to New Delhi and the Congress Party Punjab government, according to press reports.*

25X1

Army and the paramilitary Border Security Force and Central Reserve Police, dispatched by New Delhi to restore order after Assam police failed to do so, remain in control of large areas with no immediate prospect of withdrawal. The state has suspended some civil rights. The situation is further complicated by the sympathy of most state police for the Assamese agitators and their participation in violence against immigrants. Assamese student leaders continue to reject New Delhi's proposals to complete polling suspended when violence erupted and to set up tribunals to identify immigrants. According to Embassy sources, the state chief minister owes his limited progress toward restoring peace to factional divisions among the militants.

25X1

25X1

Secret

---

**Principal Assamese Political Organizations  
Active in 1983 Unrest**

*The All Assam Students' Union (AASU) is a federation of Assamese student organizations formed in 1948 to promote preservation of the Assamese language and culture. Its membership includes most Assamese students. The AASU seeks the identification of all Bangladeshi immigrants to Assam since 1951, deletion of their names from the electoral rolls, and their ultimate deportation. AASU tactics have included strikes, bombings, and shootings.* [redacted]

*The Sweccha Sevak Bahini (SSB) is a paramilitary group operating under the umbrella of the AASU. Established in 1980, the SSB has provided terrorist support for the Assamese agitation movement against Bengali "foreigners"—particularly Muslims. It is affiliated with the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh and is now operating underground. The size of its membership is unknown. It is currently headed by Joy Nath Sharma, a law graduate of Gauhati University.* [redacted]

*The All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) was founded in 1977 as an umbrella organization for all Assamese political organizations outside the AASU. Its mission is to counter perceived discrimination by the national government against Assam and submersion of its native culture. The AAGSP's tactics range from political negotiations to terrorism. Since the February 1983 elections, the organization has become dominated by Hindu communal groups.* [redacted]

---

**Caste Conflict**

In the past three years, rising activism among India's once-passive "untouchables" has sparked conflicts with higher caste Hindus that threaten rural order and challenge New Delhi's efforts to eradicate discrimination based on caste. Frustrated with the Congress Party's perceived failure to raise their social and economic status and defend their interests, the "untouchables"—referred to as the "scheduled castes"—have loosened their longstanding ties with Gandhi's Congress Party and threatened to launch a mass protest, according to the press. [redacted]

---

**Untouchables, "Scheduled Castes," and "Other Backward Classes"**

*The "Untouchables"—considered below even the lowest echelon of the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy—comprise approximately 150 million people. Caste status is inherited and defines the group within which an individual's marriage and most social relationships take place. Traditionally, caste membership also defined occupation. "Untouchables"—so named because they were confined hereditarily to such ritually polluting tasks as leatherworking and sweeping—were enjoined from touching anything to be used by "caste" Hindus. The "Untouchables" themselves comprise diverse castes.* [redacted]

*"Harijan"—meaning "Children of God"—is the term by which Mahatma Gandhi referred to the untouchables in his effort to counter the social and religious stigma attached to them.* [redacted]

*The term "Scheduled Castes" replaces "Untouchables" in the constitution, which bans untouchability. Together with the "Scheduled Tribes," they are assured of government measures to offset past social and economic handicaps.* [redacted]

*The "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs) are caste groups additional to the "Scheduled Castes" designated by the state governments to receive special educational and employment benefits to offset their relative social and economic "backwardness." The OBCs seek a constitutional amendment to extend to them the benefits applying to the scheduled castes and tribes.* [redacted]

---

The state and national governments provide the untouchables with preferential access to educational institutions, government employment, housing, and other benefits, but Indian Government reports acknowledge that the scheduled castes continue to comprise the bulk of India's poorest citizens. In our view, their ability to take advantage of government benefits

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

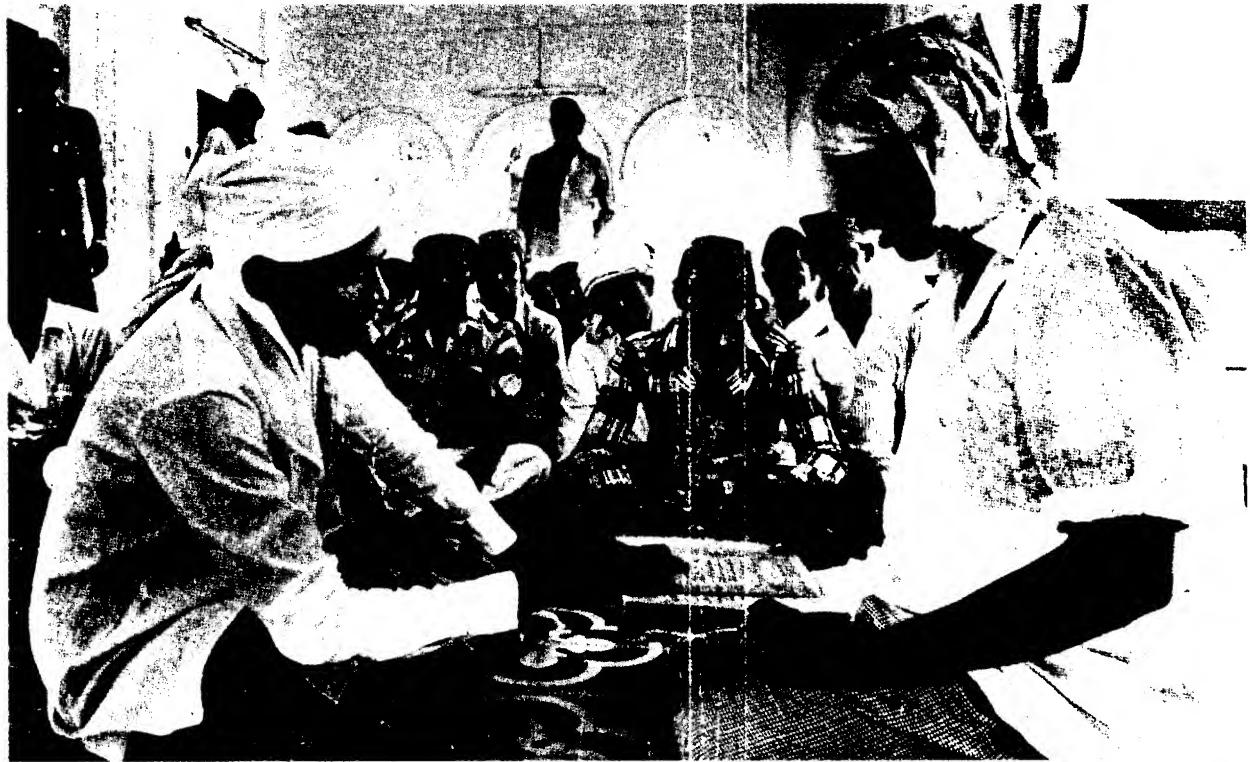
25X1

25X1

Secret

10

Secret



India Today ©

*An untouchable reading the Koran during conversion ceremony. The number of conversions to Islam in 1981 alone exceeded the total from 1935 to 1980, raising Hindu fears of Islamic expansionism.*

25X1

is limited in part by discrimination against them, which persists despite a constitutional ban on untouchability. At the same time, state governments have enlarged the clientele for government benefits to include "other backward classes," according to press analysis. We believe the expanded eligibility for government benefits in some states poses a threat of competition between untouchables and "other backward classes" that may further impede advancement by the scheduled castes.

the Indian press note that in recent years untouchables have become most militant in rural areas. Press sources indicate their continuing privation is due in part to the failure of state governments to enforce land-reform legislation. While "other backward classes" in some states have benefited by overall economic growth, poverty has driven

many rural untouchables into indentured labor. Landless untouchables in northern and western states have increasingly taken the law into their own hands and tried to compel landowners to comply with minimum wage and land ceiling laws. According to press reports, untouchables armed with village-manufactured guns have also resisted local police, who they believe discriminate against them, according to the Indian press.

The growing activism of the untouchables has brought retribution by higher status groups in many parts of India, according to press reports. Caste Hindus have razed entire scheduled caste villages in some instances. Efforts by untouchables to escape the social

25X1

25X1

25X1

Secret

stigma of their status by converting to Islam have provoked unprecedented violence against scheduled caste groups in the south.

25X1

Growing numbers of higher status Hindus are demanding that New Delhi curtail its special programs for the untouchables, while other low-status groups are seeking access to the programs, according to the Indian media. Since 1980, conflict between untouchables and higher status Hindus has spread to urban areas where upwardly mobile peasant groups seeking to increase their share of professional and government jobs believe their progress is blocked by guaranteed quotas for scheduled caste members. In 1981 and 1982 statewide violence erupted in Gujarat as higher caste Hindus protested reserved seats for untouchables in professional schools.

25X1

We believe the increasing activism of the untouchables reflects in part their loss of faith in the ruling Congress Party's commitment to advance their interests. Press sources indicate the party has steadily lost their votes since 1980—particularly in the northern and western states that have the highest concentration of untouchables. Recent Indian press analysis indicates loss of untouchable support contributed to the defeat of the Congress Party in two key southern state elections last February.

25X1

#### New Delhi's Response

We believe Prime Minister Gandhi is unwilling to address weaknesses in her government's capabilities to contain disturbances, despite her recognition of the political costs of rising communal and caste tensions. Rather than strengthening poor state government and police performance, she has centralized crisis management largely in her own hands and built up higher level security forces. In our view, Gandhi's preference for political palliatives rather than institutional reform is typified by her recent creation of a one-man governmental commission to investigate the distribution of authority between national and state governments.

25X1

the local level has compelled her to intervene, according to US diplomats and Indian press sources. Her own policies have in large measure contributed to the need for direct intervention from New Delhi, in our judgment. She has appointed weak chief ministers, tolerated continuing factional squabbles within the state units of her party, and has frequently ignored state-level party organization, according to press reporting. We believe these efforts to ensure her control have eroded the responsiveness of state governments to Gandhi's priorities, their ability to transmit grassroots information to New Delhi, and their effectiveness in managing local crises.

25X1

In our view, New Delhi has responded to communal and caste conflict by seeking to forestall further violence, sidestep blame, and minimize the political costs to her party of continuing tensions rather than address underlying grievances. Gandhi has relied on such traditional responses as:

- Minimizing disturbances as the work of radicals, foreign powers, or opposition parties.
- Offering symbolic concessions to moderate agitators while excluding extremists from negotiations.
- Delaying substantive talks while government-appointed commissions study underlying problems.
- Relying on her direct involvement and prestige to defuse incipient violence.

25X1

The continuing conflict in Assam, Punjab, and elsewhere has called into question Gandhi's strategy for managing crises, according to many Indian political commentators. Embassy and press sources have described her response to the turmoil in Punjab as "too little, too late." In our view, Gandhi's intervention in communal conflicts only after they have reached the crisis stage limits prospects for their successful resolution and undermines her claim to be the sole national leader capable of maintaining public order.

25X1

**Political.** In the past, Gandhi tried to remain aloof from civil disturbances, but the declining ability of state governments to contain communal conflicts at

Gandhi's personal role in resolving diverse communal problems has created a bottleneck in decisionmaking that slows New Delhi's response to crises, according to Indian media commentators. the ineffectiveness of

25X1

25X1

25X1

Secret

12

Secret

Gandhi's strategy has damaged her image, strengthened extremist leaders at the expense of moderates seeking redress through negotiations, and increased government reliance on repressive measures. [redacted]

25X1  
25X1

**Security.** The limited success of Gandhi's political strategies has increased the frequency and visibility of New Delhi's security response to communal conflict. Although we judge that India is able to control civil disorders, the declining performance of local and state police has added to problems of maintaining order. As a result, New Delhi is being increasingly compelled to deploy paramilitary—and occasionally military—forces to troubled areas. [redacted]

25X1  
25X1

**Police.** New Delhi has traditionally relied on a graduated response to civil disturbances, according to reliable Indian commentators. The system is designed to shift responsibility upward as required from local to state-level police. The State Provincial Armed Constabularies, numbering about 242,000 men nationwide, are the states' initial recourse when unarmed local police are unable to cope with a problem, according to Embassy reporting. [redacted]

25X1  
25X1

A range of problems not yet addressed by the government has reduced the capabilities of state and local police in recent years. Embassy and press sources report that some units of the state police are demoralized and highly susceptible to political corruption. These observers note that the police have contributed to the breakdown of public order by resorting to force too quickly during confrontations—particularly against untouchables and Muslims, who allege discriminatory treatment. According to diplomatic sources, increased press coverage of police ineptitude, brutality, and corruption has fed public hostility and even violence against the police. [redacted]

25X1  
25X1

In some instances, police violence has stemmed from working conditions that are poor even by Indian standards, particularly for the enlisted ranks. The Indian police system divides local and state police into the professional Indian Police Service, which staffs middle- and senior-level positions nationally, and constable or enlisted ranks, which have virtually no opportunities for promotion or geographic mobility.

Local and state police lack effective grievance procedures and are forbidden to strike, according to press sources. [redacted]

The decline in state and local police performance comes at a time when police face new levels of resistance to their authority. Embassy and press reporting indicates that since 1980 the widespread use of illegal arms by Hindus and minority groups in confrontations has complicated police efforts to restore order. Similarly, rural violence has become intractable with the spread of village-manufactured guns and the increased resort to force by low-status groups—including the untouchables. [redacted]

**Paramilitary.** Faced with problems among state and local police units, the state and national governments have increasingly resorted to the use of paramilitary forces, a shift that has heightened friction among different security forces. Each of the paramilitary forces has a distinct internal security mission in addition to its military functions. Two of these paramilitary groups—the Border Security Force and the Central Reserve Police—have become key participants in riot control. [redacted]

Differences in rank, organization, and training procedures have created problems when two paramilitary forces have been assigned to cope with civil disorders, according to diplomatic and press sources. The Indian press reports that tensions between the military forces deployed to states and the locally based state police have been exacerbated by the tendency of the state governments to retain paramilitary forces under their control as long as possible. The paramilitary forces themselves have experienced morale problems stemming from limited opportunities for promotion and the absence of grievance procedures. [redacted]

In our view, since her return to power in 1980, Gandhi has sidestepped the problems of both police and paramilitary by merely expanding the roles of paramilitary and army units in managing civil disorders. Rather than consolidating existing paramilitary units,

Secret



*This cartoon conveys ironically the ruling party's response to charges by the Police Commission that arbitrary political intervention by politicians (such as the Congress politician on the right) undermines the performance of the police (constable on the left).*

New Delhi has formed still another such force—the Special Police Force—to deal exclusively with caste and communal conflicts. Gandhi's Congress Party has withheld from publication most portions of the National Police Commission's reports and recommendations on police working conditions, according to press reports. Press sources indicate New Delhi recently declined to accept the findings of a Commission report describing the frequent interference of politicians as a major impediment to police performance.

*Army.* Embassy and press sources have reported that the growing responsibility of Army troops in performing internal security duties is distasteful to the traditionally apolitical Army. The upward delegation of responsibility for public order, with the Army often replacing or assuming command over paramilitary units and the police relegated to a minor role, has reportedly demoralized state and paramilitary forces. The Army has tried to maintain a low profile in the control of internal disturbances such as those in Assam, according to US diplomats.

#### Prospects

In our judgment, widening civil disorders have already eroded important elements of the Indian political system's future stability. These conflicts have

cumulatively strained the capabilities of India's security forces and highlighted long-term problems resulting from Gandhi's policies, in our view. The growing trend toward crisis management by New Delhi has weakened state governments and delayed the government response. Delays have in turn fueled the rise of communal politics that undermine the secular basis of the Indian Government.

25X1

We believe Gandhi's dominance of the Indian political scene is secure in the short term in the absence of another nationally recognized leader, but the steady deterioration of the Congress Party's political base will pose formidable problems for her successor. Generally reliable Indian media commentators believe the failure of the government to reduce tensions has contributed to the breakdown of longstanding electoral alliances with minorities that help ensure the ruling party's tenure. Press reports indicate that Gandhi's perceived failure to protect the Muslims in Assam will probably swell the recent defections of Muslims from the Congress Party. Growing Sikh chauvinism in Punjab is fueling Sikh support for the Akali Dal at the expense of the Congress Party. Untouchables are voting independently. According to Embassy sources, Gandhi may be trying to offset such losses by seeking greater support from Hindus in the populous north who generally vote for the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party.

25X1

#### Foreign Policy Implications

We believe the deepening communal and caste tensions in India have several implications for US strategic and diplomatic interests in South Asia. Growing communal conflicts complicate India's efforts to improve ties with the United States, Pakistan, and the Arab states by increasing Gandhi's fears that these governments seek to destabilize her government. Her tendency to blame the "foreign hand" for her domestic political problems—including communal and regional strife—has engendered friction in India's relations with these countries, according to respected Indian commentators.

25X1

25X1

Secret

Secret



*This cartoon from the prestigious English-language Indian Express spoofs Gandhi's return to power in 1980 on a platform of "government that works." Since then, she has publicly blamed much domestic unrest on covert foreign intervention.*

Gandhi's suspicions that Washington is contributing to unrest in Punjab and Assam could—in our judgment—become a growing obstacle to the closer ties she has sought with the United States in the past two years. Heightened distrust of US intentions toward India could lead New Delhi to renew its harsh censure of Washington's security assistance to Islamabad. Embassy sources note Gandhi has publicly stated that the United States is the only base for the Sikh separatist movement, which she views as a threat to India's stability.

New Delhi views Washington's actions regarding the Khalistan movement—including the decision last March to allow a visit by a separatist leader based in England—as a major irritant in Indo-US relations. The Indian press has also reported Gandhi's statements implying possible CIA involvement in Assam.

We believe Hindu-Muslim tensions—including those in Assam—have strained New Delhi's relations with Islamabad and the Arab states.

The Indian press

indicates that Gandhi suspects the Arab states are funding Muslim dissidents in India, but at the same time she is eager to project India as a country in which Muslim interests are protected. New Delhi's recent diplomatic demarcations to Pakistan and the Arab Gulf states concerning their press treatment of the Assam crisis may foreshadow further strains in India's relations with these countries, in our judgment. Increased concern about Pakistani intervention in India's internal affairs could impede forthcoming negotiations on a nonaggression pact or friendship treaty between the two countries.

25X1

The continuing disorders in India have already created opportunities for involvement by Moscow. Although Gandhi continues to believe Indian interests are served by close relations with Moscow, her suspicions of Soviet interference in domestic politics set limits on the relationship and contribute to her desire to strengthen ties with the West. Gandhi's concerns appear to be well founded. Earlier this year we learned of Moscow's plan to undertake active measures to heighten New Delhi's fear of Islamic fundamentalism—we believe with a view to undermining Indo-Pakistani detente.

25X1

Moscow has sought to chill Indian relations with the United States, China, and Pakistan through disinformation campaigns. The pro-Soviet Indian press and Soviet media—including Indian-language broadcasts beamed at India—regularly feature articles alleging US and Chinese involvement in Assam, US intervention in Punjab, and Pakistani involvement in Hindu-Muslim conflicts. The pro-Moscow Indian media carried reports earlier this year of purported US plans to "balkanize" India. Respected Indian news publications as well as the US Embassy sought to discredit the reports as disinformation efforts. Despite Gandhi's misgivings about Soviet activities in India, we believe Moscow's clandestine efforts have exacerbated her fears regarding US and Pakistani intentions.

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1  
25X1

**Secret**

## Appendix

---

### The Politics of Communalism: Prominent Leaders

		Organizational Affiliation	Relationship to Government
<b>Muslim</b>			
Abdullah Bukhari		Influential Imam (religious head) of principal mosque in Delhi—the Jama Masjid.	An outspoken critic of Gandhi's policies concerning Indian Muslims. He publicly advocates that Muslims oppose her government.
Syed Shahabuddin		Member of Janata Party. Member of Upper House (Rajya Sabha), Parliament.	Initiated memorandum to Gandhi earlier this year listing concerns of Muslim members of parliament.
Abut Tayeb Ahmed		Principal Muslim religious leader (Imam) of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh State. Particularly influential among Muslims in northern India.	Has publicly criticized all politicians for their role in communal conflict.

---

**The Politics of Communalism: Prominent Leaders (Continued)**

Hindu	Organizational Affiliation	Relationship to Government
Atal Behari Vajpayee	 Has headed Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), best organized opposition party, since its formation in 1980. In 1968 helped found its predecessor, the Jan Sangh Party.	A leading critic of Gandhi, he is widely viewed as a potential challenger to her leadership.
Balasaheb Deoras	 Heads the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary organization dedicated to Hindu revivalism. The RSS is affiliated with the BJP.	Gandhi frequently blames the RSS for communal strife. She banned the RSS during her emergency rule, 1975-77, and imprisoned Deoras during that period.
Dr. Karan Singh	 Heads the Virat Hindu Samaj (VHS), a Hindu revivalist organization.	Resigned from ruling Congress Party in 1977, in opposition to Gandhi's emergency rule. Cites differences with her as principal obstacle to his rejoining the party.

~~Secret~~**The Politics of Communalism: Prominent Leaders (Continued)**

	Organizational Affiliation	Relationship to Government
<b>Sikh</b> Dr. Jagjit Singh Chauhan	British-based leader of Sikh separatist "Khalistan" movement since 1980.	Government revoked his passport and excluded him from India several years ago. Chauhan has challenged these actions in an Indian High Court.
Harchand Singh Longowal	President, Akali Dal Party—largest and oldest Sikh political party in Punjab State.	Has increasingly represented Sikhs of Punjab in negotiations with national government for greater state autonomy. His position has become less moderate under pressure from J. S. Bhindranwale.
Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale	Extremist leader of the fundamentalist Bhindranwale sect and the Sikh agitation in Punjab.	Favors separate Sikh nation opposed by New Delhi. Gained national attention in 1981 when he was arrested for murder of a critic of Sikh separatist movement. Remains accused of crime, though was released in 1981 following protest riots by his followers.

---

**The Politics of Communalism: Prominent Leaders (Continued)**

	Organizational Affiliation	Relationship to Government
<b>Assamese</b> Bhrgu Phukan and Prafulla Mahanta	 Leaders of the All Assamese Students' Union (AASU).	Briefly imprisoned earlier this year after election violence began in Assam. The AASU opposed holding February elections in Assam.
Joy Nath Sarma	 Head of the Swechha Sevak Bahini, anti-Muslim "volunteer force" of the AASU. Also a member of Hindu nationalist RSS.	Imprisoned under National Security Act in February 1983. Released under parole as a condition imposed by the AASU for participation in negotiations with New Delhi earlier this year.
Atul Bora	 Convenor of the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP)—ethnic Assamese political umbrella organization.	Opposed holding February state elections in Assam.

25X1

